

Darkness, Light and Beyond: Reading Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to analyse how Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* juxtaposes the two contrasting faces of present Indian society and polity through a unique character Balram Halwai. It intends to explore to what extent Balram is able to escape from the Darkness and enter into the Light, to what extent he is controlled by social hierarchies and functions of power when he wants to unshackle the chain of servitude, to what extent the world of Light illuminates his persona, and to what extent he is able to resist the system and go beyond the so-called Dark-Light binary. The article brings about issues of the New World Order such as multinational capitalism, global imperialism, dynamics of deprivation and discrimination, caste, class-consciousness, the myth of India shining or sinking and so on. Regarding the process of individual identity formation in the web of power apparatuses, it mainly focuses on two aspects throughout the analysis— the predicament of the third-world subalterns in the grip of neo-colonialists and their chances of resistance to the neo-colonial hegemony formulated mainly through the conditions of global capitalism in postcolonial societies.

Introduction

“Incredible India” is a slogan that attracts a huge number of tourists around the world to experience unity in diversity in India. “Digital India”¹ is another slogan very recently chanted by the key persons of Indian Government to denote the emergence of a technologically shining India. On the other hand, the world has observed barbarous attacks on minority and lower caste people in Uttar Pradesh in India. In one incident, a Muslim was beaten to death on the

¹ “In order to create participative, transparent and responsive government, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the much ambitious 'Digital India' programme on Wednesday, July 1, 2015, at the Indira Gandhi Indoor Stadium in the national capital.” For details see Panwar. <http://www.oneindia.com/india/live-pm-narendra-modi-ravi-shankar-prasad-launch-digital-india-programme-1793574.html>

excuse that he was suspected to possess meat or non-veg in his house, and in another incident a lower caste woman was stripped naked in public. These apparently contrasting scenarios not only describe a binary construction of Indian society, but also problematise the very notion of India emerging as a superpower in the new world order.

The Oscar winning Bollywood film *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) presents a character Jamal Malik from the “other” India who finds his fortunes by winning the grand prize of the television game show *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (Who will become a Millionaire?), an Indian version of the UK game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* He answers the questions not through formal education, but through experiences and practical knowledge learnt from struggles of life, from the streets, and from the reality of living and surviving in the “other” India. His overwhelming inquisitiveness and latent talent suppressed by the system of capitalist society are evident in Balram, the protagonist of *The White Tiger* who also learns from the streets, from life, from the air, from his surroundings, and remains a perpetual eavesdropper. *Slumdog Millionaire* juxtaposes, among others, two sides of India: one having technologically developed cultures and capitals like call-centres and call-girls, outsourcings and outings, hi-tech cities, online shopping, clubs and pubs, and TV reality shows and other entertainment shows for the elites; another having shanties, shit and garbage, exploitation, child labour, child prostitution, human trafficking, and organ trade.

The present article attempts to offer a brief analysis of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, considering issues of the New World Order such as multinational capitalism, global imperialism, dynamics of deprivation and discrimination, caste, class-consciousness, the myth of India shining or sinking etc. The focus will mainly be on two aspects throughout the analysis—the predicament of the third-world subalterns in the grip of neo-colonialists in postcolonial capitalist cities and their chances of resistance to the neo-colonial hegemony formulated mainly through the conditions of global capitalism in so-called postcolonial societies.

The Darkness versus the Light

The novel progresses with a binary narrative of Indian society in a letter form having seven sections/ chapters. Balram Halwai, the only narrator spends seven nights writing the letter to the Chinese Premiere, Wen Jiabao. The novel seems to provide a journalistic view of Indian society since most incidents are like newspaper reports, and some images and stories even look like those of Bollywood movies.

The White Tiger is a record of Balram's perilous journey to discover and rediscover his self and identities in different phases of life. The novel depicts two extreme sides of India—the Darkness and the Light. He describes the government village school in the Darkness where he studied— teachers looting the food and money sanctioned for students, government hospitals in villages where people die as doctors keep busy serving in private clinics, lack of drinking water, defunct sewerage system and so on. He describes through his extraordinary narrative skill that when the small malnourished pale young bodies move from table to table in the tea stall, serving and cleaning, they look like nothing but human spiders. He also finds innumerable human spiders moving in the lanes and lawns of Delhi. On the other hand, he points out that India has entrepreneurs, hi-tech cities, online marketing, call centres and all other facilities of a capitalist country (Adiga 4). One more contrast is that Delhi, the city of the light has the Red Fort, but Laxmangarh, Balram's village of the darkness has a Black Fort (ibid. 21).

Through his eyes we see a different India that is not compatible with the Bollywood manufactured India. His India consists of feudal landlords who are described as ferocious animals. They eat up property and lands of village peasants and the poor. Balram is the son of a land loser-turned-rickshaw puller. After losing lands to the feudal landlord, his father ended up as a rickshaw puller to support his family. Though Balram belongs to the Halwai caste and is supposed to make sweets by profession, he has to work as a coal-breaker and tea-boy in a small tea stall. He appears to be a social critic committed to subverting any notion of India shining. The Ganges he talks of is not a sacred river supposed to wash away sins of the devotees, but the most polluted river filled with filth and shit.

After killing his master Ashok, a rich businessman in Delhi and stealing his money Balram flees to Bangalore. He takes up his master's name "Ashok Sharma" and runs a business as an entrepreneur by bribing the police and politicians. He becomes a neo-capitalist, one of the members of the bourgeoisie, in the shining India. Occasionally he speaks for a sort of socialist revolution in India; he even tries to justify the murder of his master as an action of the repressed against the oppressor. Though Balram has settled down in the world of capitalists, he is often haunted by his past sin, the murder of his master. He has dreams to do newer businesses in order to contribute to building a really shining India. He believes that the future of the world capital lies in the East indicating the emergence of China and India as economic superpowers.

Balam comments on democracy, election system, corruption, caste, and class. He claims that because of Indian democracy he has a birthday². He is critical of the followers of Mahatma Gandhi since he finds people involved in all types of corruption, keeping his portrait in their offices as a signpost of their innocence. Elections are just a circus-show in the village, even in big cities votes can be rigged. Most importantly, Balam talks about the national numbness and a serious lack of conscience among the Indian middle class. The lower class or subalterns are forced to remain asleep, that is, they do not have any voice or agency to speak up. It is compared to the Rooster Coop where everyone is locked in a system, and nobody is able to scale its boundary. Though they know very well that their lives are coming to an end soon, they even do not wish to resist as “Indians are the world’s most honest people, . . .” (Adiga 174). Balam thinks that the British locked all the Indians (as if they were animals) in a zoo; but when they quit India, the zoo was opened and the animals dispersed into utter wilderness, untameable and uncontrollable. According to him, at present, “the very same thing is done with human beings in this country.” (Ibid. 174). He argues that 99.9 percent of Indians mostly consisting of lower class or working class people are caught in the Rooster Coop (ibid. 175-76).

On almost all pages of the novel a dark India, an “other” India is projected with mocking and shocking images.

Balam: A Subaltern or a Survivor?

In writing the letters to the Chinese Premier Balam uses English in order to expose the colonial inheritance India still bears, unveil the slimy side of the Darkness, the other India, and reveal the farce of multinational capitalism in third-world cities. Balam starts the first letter this way—

“Mr Premier,
Sir.

Neither you nor I speak English, but there are some things that can be said only in English.” (Adiga 3).

In Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* Prospero enslaves Caliban and teaches him his language (English) to civilise him. But when Caliban discovers the hypocrisy and fickleness of his white master’s civilisation, he uses his master’s language to confront him. He uses the language to curse, to stress

² To include his name in the voter list, “a man in a government uniform” asked him about his age or date of birth. When Balam replied that he did not know his age as his parents did not make note of his birth-date, the man said, “I think you’re eighteen. I think you turned eighteen today.” In this way, he “got a birth day from the government.” (Adiga 96-97).

what the truth is, and to articulate how he is oppressed, deprived and devastated; in a word, what he does by using English is resist:

“Caliban: ‘You taught me language; and my profit on’t
Is, I know how to curse.’” (Act-1, Scene-II)

Similarly, Balram uses the English language to expose the wounds on the body of “Mother India”, which are layered with pretence and promises of nationalism, democracy, and modernism in the guise of global capitalism. He thinks only this English phrase “What a fucking joke” (Adiga 7) can be used to denote the double-standard of Indian entrepreneurs, businessmen, politicians, and above all the Indian society: “straight and crooked, mocking and believing, sly and sincere, at the same time.” (ibid. 9). To narrate a hilarious as well as horrific story of other India he uses English tinged with unprecedented phraseology, jaw-dropping images, razor-sharp irony, macabre humour, and sometimes a sort of “breezy absurdity.”

Spivak’s claim— “the subaltern cannot speak . . . there is no space from which the subaltern can speak” (271-313)— has raised a lot of debate and criticism. The debates carried on among the metropolitan academics centre on whether the subaltern has agency and voice to speak. Here the interesting thing is that until the privileged academics continue the debates and discussions on behalf of the subalterns, exercising their power, position and agency, the subaltern will never have any voice to speak and resist. Some Marxists like Irfan Habib, in Indian caste contexts, point out that subaltern scholars such as Spivak are happy to narrate the tragic stories of the subalterns, but they fail to lead them to acts of resistance (7). Since there are caste ideologies considered universal and often sacred in terms of religion, which the subalterns share with the ruling class or feudalists, they cannot even raise their voice against oppression and injustice, let alone protest and resist strongly. That is exactly what is depicted through the village folks of Laxmanghar (Balram’s native village) in *The White Tiger*. However, when given the omnipotent agency to represent and resist, they, like Balram, can speak marvellously with mordant wit.

Balram is completely free to generate his awful articulations; he can retort to anything he thinks worthy of paying attention to. When a subaltern is given voice, s/he may speak in a powerful language that can challenge the pillars of established discourses. The language of one’s heart certainly diminishes the dynamics of elite taste and sensibility, for s/he cannot be silenced by telling him/ her a “fucking joke.” He was somehow able to escape from the Darkness to the Light even though he had to murder his master in

doing so. He is seen writing letters to the Chinese Prime Minister sitting in his office room in front of the silver Macintosh laptop he bought online. In contrast, poor drivers, who remain drivers lifelong, could never narrate their stories because they are usually silenced by the system or frequently disappear or rot in jails. Therefore, it should be noted that when Balram enjoys having money, power and agency after changing himself into an entrepreneur, only then is he able to speak or tell his story.

Politics of Name and Identity

Name is a marker of someone's caste background and social status in India. Most times in Indian society caste-identity, whether in the Darkness or in the Light, proves to be more credible than other identities. When Balram seeks employment as a driver, his driving skill is not considered, it is only his caste that can guarantee him the job. After he takes part in a driving test, the master asks him—

“What's your last name again?”

‘Halwai.’

‘Halwai. . .’ He turned to the small dark man. ‘What caste is that, top or bottom?’” (Adiga 62)

Balram knows that his fortune depends on the answer to this last question. However, caste-identity is not only considered for menial jobs in rural places or in a feudal society, but also taken for granted in official job interviews. Prakash Jha's film *Arakshan* (2011) starts with a scene in which the protagonist Deepak Kumar (played by Saif Ali Khan) appears before an interview board. The first question one of the board members asks is—“Deepak . . . Kumar (stressing “Kumar” with a scornful tone), what is your full name?” Before selecting him for the job, they first want to know his family background and social status. Quite surprisingly, they have not asked any questions with regard to his subject and specialisation. After confirming that he is from a lower caste background, they start humiliating him. The interview ends with Deepak Kumar's protest in a mild manner: “You've been repeatedly mocking my caste and status.” He then boldly states—“A person's intelligence and performance do not depend on his background.” To prove his statement, he refers to Babasaheb Ambedkar, who outlined India's Constitution: “It was a backward caste person who drafted our country's Constitution.”

Deepak Kumar stood first in his M. Sc in the university's merit list, but he is not identified with that. Just after learning his caste identity, the interviewers' attitudes change drastically—and they know that they are not selecting him even though he is the topper. This brief scene speaks volumes

about the discriminatory and exclusionary practice on the basis of caste identity in the twenty first century Indian society. This scene underscores how one's identity is fixed in the social hierarchy, even before his birth. The scene further reminds one of the wound of deep-rooted social divisions in India, which is yet to be healed. The people involved in the scene are all from the educated class who are supposed to evaluate a job seeker's identity on the basis of performance, aptitude, and qualification rather than his pre-determined caste background. This ever-existing caste hierarchy, in fact, challenges discourses centring on the making of "Mother" India, "shining" India, or its claim to being "the world's largest democracy".

Balram refers to the caste system that existed in the past and how everyone in their place was happy. It was like a clean, well-kept, orderly zoo. "Goldsmiths here. Cowherds here. Landlords there. The man called a Halwai made sweets. The man called a cowherd tended cows. The untouchable cleaned faeces." (Adiga 63). However, he argues that though in older days "there were one thousand castes and destinies in India, in the present day capitalist India, there exist only two castes: "Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies."(ibid. 64). Balram's comment seems naïve as he offers a sort of holistic observation, ignoring the urge to abolish the system. Ambedkar differs from Gandhi on the caste issue— while the former professes the elimination of the entire system, "identifying the problem as the "symptom" of the entire system, the symptom which can only be resolved by way of abolishing the entire system", the latter accepts the system as essential and fundamental, calling the outcastes or untouchables euphemistically "Harijans"(children of God) and "allowing them to 'fall in love with themselves' in their humiliating identity, to accept their degrading work as a noble necessary social task, to perceive even the degrading nature of their work as a sign of their sacrifice, of their readiness to do the dirty job for society." (Zizek, unnumbered)

In *The White Tiger*, a few characters such as Vijay can be located who could overcome the caste boundary by becoming involved in politics, working as sidekicks to the big politicians and thus making money and acquiring status. Probably, this is the reason Balram estimates that in India there are only two castes: the rich and the poor. Again, it is a fact that caste issue is over-politicised to exploit particular caste communities as a means of coming to power. Many politicians speak for a casteless and classless society, but they would not practice it in their lives. In this regard, M. N. Srinivas in his book *Caste in Modern India* mentions a thoughtful anecdote. In Mysore during April 1954, there was a fight between Holeyas (Harijans) and Okkaligas (Peasants) as Holeyas were demanding Okkaliga girls be given in marriage to

them. When one Okkaliga leader complained to Srinivas, he tried to “explain to him the aims and ideals of the Congress and the Republic [casteless and classless society], . . .” The Okkaliga leader replied shrewdly, hitting the nail on the head: “Then let them [the elected representatives] invite Holeyas to their homes for dinner, and give them their daughters in marriage, and we will follow suit.” (71).

Though the attempt to abolish caste system is one of the social reforms promised by all political parties in India, it is found inseparably rooted in all strata of society. Habib in his essay “Caste in Indian Society” concludes, “Caste still remains perhaps the single most important divisive factor in our country [India].” (179).

Ashok Sharma: A Global Citizen of Tomorrow's India?

The effects of globalisation in the age of multinational capitalism can affect one's identity construction. Driven by the ultimate urge of global capitalism, a new capitalist citizen can emerge with a sense of cultural cosmopolitanism, accessibility to communication network across the globe, an eastward flow of global capital, and an all-through availability of cheap commodities in third-world cities. Nick Stevenson in “Globalisation, National Cultures and Cultural Citizenship” develops an argument with respect to the media of mass communication, globalisation processes and what is called cultural citizenship. Stevenson argues that in the British and European contexts the flow of globalisation makes national cultures more powerful whereas in postcolonial or third-world cities globalised elites seem less aware of national cultures and ethics. In relation to Mr. Ashok, one of the important characters in Balram's narratives, we can attempt to link together the conditions of globalising processes and the possibilities of global citizenship in the context of the development of communication systems and the fast flow of capitals eastward.

Mr. Ashok and his Christian wife Pinky represent the upper class Indian citizens who aspire to be more global (American-Indian) than Indian. Ashok is mainly portrayed through Balram's forceful narratives. Convinced by his father and brother, who are feudal masters-turned-city-scams, that there are a lot of opportunities in India emerging as an economic superpower, Ashok along with his wife Pinky comes back to India to run his family business.

Ashok appears to be clumsy at first when he comes to know that in Delhi business, politics, prostitution, and bribery are interrelated. To Balram, Delhi, the capital of a glorious nation is “[t]he seat of Parliament, of the president, of all ministers and prime ministers. The pride of our civil planning.

The showcase of the republic. . . . And the truth is that Delhi is a crazy city.”(Adiga 118). Delhi is not only depicted as a messy city with unplanned lanes, buildings, housings growing abruptly, streets having peculiar names and numbers, never ending traffic jams and thousands of people from the Darkness living like animals “under the huge bridges and overpasses,” and “defecating in the open . . . in front of the slum”, but also a “make-it-happen” city with business-scams, ministers taking bribes, all forces of globalisation and urbanisation: IT industries, real estate business, pubs, bars, five star hotels, call-girls, and what not. Just back from America, Ashok is quite tensed about high-taxes, but his brother Mukesh informs him of the “fixer” fellow who fixes up tax-free business in Delhi. He adds— “This is India, not America. There is always a way out here.” (ibid. 121).

Later, Ashok ends up being part of the global network of elites who thrive in any part of the world as agents of global political economy. He aspires to stay back in Delhi as he senses that the Indian economy is shining for the neo-capitalists in Gurgaon, the *modernest* suburb of Delhi having all prospects—American Express, Microsoft, and offices of all big American companies, shopping malls each having a cinema inside — to be a first world city such as New York (Adiga 122). But he fails pathetically to be a truly cosmopolitan citizen; he remains merely a player in the global network of power, politics and corruption.

Conclusion

Unquestionably, the grim world *The White Tiger* portrays through Balram is “far removed from the glossy images of Bollywood stars and technology entrepreneurs that have been displacing earlier (and equally clichéd) Indian stereotypes featuring yoga and spirituality.” (Kapur Unnumbered). But the rich urban Indians are not prepared to see this projection of Indian life and society. In Kapur’s view, after the novel was awarded the Man Booker Prize, “some in India lambasted it as a Western conspiracy to deny the country’s economic progress.” (unnumbered). However, through unsentimental prose and an unprecedented character Adiga seems committed to stripping away “the sheen of a self-congratulatory nation and reveals instead a country where the social compact is being stretched to the breaking point.” (ibid.).

As a novelist Adiga’s achievement is not beyond question. The oversimplification of the narrative to highlight all the evils and vices of Indian society may seem biased and monotonous. The novel is sometimes overwhelmed by the blank, bleak, and pervading horror of “the Darkness”

where there seems no light, no passage for one to come out to see a ray of sunlight. Besides, all characters are not developed naturally, especially Ashok and his wife seem to be stereotyped projections of upper-class elites and on certain occasions they are reduced to caricatures. Though Balram remains at the centre of the novel, he does not sound true all the time. Overall, the narrative of the novel lacks the profundity of complex human relations. Balram narrates his story, mostly using his verbal prowess whereas the complexity of his inner thoughts does not bloom fully.

To sum up, we can assert that the real nature of Indian society is somewhere between the media depiction of India shining and Balram's projection of the "other" India. Undoubtedly, India's prospect of emerging as a superpower in world politics and economy throws a number of challenges before the vast country of the South Asian region. Sameer Amin in his essay "India, a Great Power?", presenting the concept of India shining along with the picture of real India, brings about all the possible challenges India has to come across and deal with to be really shining in the world. He doubts that "independent India has not tackled the major challenge of radically transforming structures inherited from colonial capitalism" and questions the possibility of "India's accession to the status of a great modern power . . . without undergoing real social revolution." (unnumbered). As a huge country, India must have a lot of problems and prospects stemming out of diversities and the very notion of "unity-in-diversity".³ It is difficult to depict Indian society as a whole, as there are so many layers and dimensions based on cultural, linguistic, regional, religious, indigenous and other aspects. The attempt to generalise India's diversities into one framework is a futile and ridiculous one. However, Adiga's characters somehow manage to bring forth some tensions and issues of the present Indian society that deserve to be pondered upon.

³ It is a cliché about diversities of South Asia. Bose and Jalal suggest that it would be more appropriate to characterise South Asian countries such as India and their peoples as presenting a picture of "immense diversity within a broad contour of unity." (4).

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